Wanderer

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Wanderer

by Anna_Jay

Summary

A new centaur enters the herd. Will wants nothing to do with him. Too bad he never had a choice.

Notes

I decided to get back into writing by doing a monster challenge~! I had been working on this on and off for a while, so no regular updates.
First up: Centaurs

See the end of the work for more notes

Stranger

Will did not know what to think of the new stallion who had wandered into the herd days ago. He listened to the others as they whispered amongst each other and watched the stranger. The strange centaur, Hannibal, had succeeded in wooing all of the mares and a few stallions without even trying, and Will could see why. He wasn't like the others who had matching hair and fur colors. The top of his head was ashen blonde and his fur as black as the shadows on a moonless night. If not it was his eyes that drew the herd. They were a deep maroon, which stood out from everyone else's blues and browns. Hannibal even managed to win the favor of the leader, Jack, and was welcomed to stay as long as he wanted, just as long as he didn't try to take any of the mares.

It was the way of their kind. Lone stallions came looking for a mate to court and steal away from the herd to start their own units. Will had witnessed this happen with many of their own. Either the stallions would come of age and challenge Jack, be defeated, and driven out, or the mares would be convinced to leave with a passing stallion.

Having seen the sudden change in the other stallions, Will assumed that when his coming of age came he would also feel the pressing urge to strike out against Jack or leave the herd. However, four summers had passed since and no urge consumed him. He was content to remain in the herd, and Jack, too, was okay as long as he didn't try to mate with any of the mares. Not that Will wanted to. The remaining mares he either thought of as a maternal figure or as a sister. The only mare he felt any strong feelings toward was Alana, but she had made her intentions clear she did not see him as a suitable mate.

Will was satisfied with the idea he would never find a mate and stay in the herd until his dying days. However, Hannibal complicated that plan. Wherever Will turned Hannibal was never far behind, trailing after Will at a respectable distance, but still close enough to make his presence known. He had to admit, the stranger was an attractive stallion, but Will didn't want anything to do with him, so he tried his best to ignore him.

Hannibal, however, proved he did not wish to be ignored.

His attempts to be near Will did not go unnoticed by the others. Will caught their disapproving stares and dumbfounded looks. Why would Hannibal, a near perfect stallion, want Will.

Freddie, the ginger centaur with bouncing curls and a fiery temper to match leaned into Hannibal's personal space and whispered loudly when Will walked by, "You shouldn't get mixed up with him. He's a meat eater."

Will tried his best not to flinch at her comment and refused to look in their direction. He couldn't face Freddie's cruel smile nor witness Hannibal's inevitable expression transform into disgust. Will was the only member of their herd that ate meat. It was only fish, but it made the others wary of him and distanced themselves.

Will kept his eyes forward as he made his way down to the river to finish his lures. It was one way to keep the others away. Two minutes into making his lure, however, graced him with a visitor.

“These lands are very lush,” Hannibal commented, admiring the rolling hills and the blanket of forest. His foreign accent danced around Will’s ears, and the brunet stallion unconsciously flicked them toward the source. “I can see why Jack refuses to give up his position even at his age.”

Will gave him a sidelong glance before resuming in making his fishing lure. His hopes that the other would disappear were dashed when Hannibal edged closer and watched with keen eyes.

“How do you know how to make lures?”

Will was sorely tempted to keep ignoring him, but his manners won in the end. That, and Hannibal honestly sounded interested.

Or perhaps Will was just hoping.

“My father taught me.” He answered, planning on keeping it at that, but he was distracted as Hannibal knelt down in the grass beside him and held his hand out.

“May I?”

Will paused before reluctantly handing over the finished lure. Tanned fingers ran along feathers and a thumb gently edged the point. “It is beautiful. Where did you find the silver?”

Will shrugged, unsure on how to go about this interest.

“It isn’t hard if you know where to look.” Will finally replied, taking the lure when Hannibal offered it back to him.

Hannibal nodded, a small smile on his features as he watched Will attached the lure to his rod. “I see. Have you always been part of the herd, then?”

“No.” Will replied as he finishes his fishing rod. “My father and I came when I was a small foal. I don’t really remember a life outside this one, to be honest.”

“Is that why you haven’t ventured out?” Hannibal inquired, sitting back and picking off what appeared to be nothing off his black coat. “Gone off to seek out new pastures, so to speak.”

“I see no need to go off into the unknown. Why surround myself with strangers that will judge me when I can get the same treatment from those I know.”

Hannibal gave him a look before shaking his head. “You might find leaving the herd beneficial for your health, William. Here you are unusual, but there could be another that partakes in the same activities just waiting for you.”

Will snorted. “Somehow I don’t believe that.” He stood and would have left had Hannibal not placed his hand on his front leg. Will froze under the warm hand.

“Think it over, Will.” Hannibal said softly, his fingers briefly trailing over Will’s dark brown fur as he removed his hand. Will remained in his position before stepping away without a word.

The following days brought small presents.

Will found little flowers scattered around his nest the first day. He didn’t think anything of it. It wasn’t unusual for the foals to make flower creations for their elders. Sure Will hadn’t seen any grace his nest, for the foals, while respectful, kept a far distance from him. Will told himself it didn’t bother him. Still, his day was brightened by the flowers.

Two more days brought another flower creation in the form of a crown in the center of Will’s nest. As with the first batch of flowers, he didn’t mind them. Similar to before, he thought it was a gift from one of the foals or even one of the others as a prank.

He picked it up with the intentions of throwing it out, and jumped as he was pricked. He pulled his hand back and inspected his bloodless fingers before turning his attention to the crown.

The crown was different. Most crowns he had seen had three or four types of flowers tied together. This one only held one type of flower, a deep red rose nearing black embedded in a braid of thorned vines.

A name floated to the back of Will’s head which he quickly dismissed. He once again made to pick up the crown and hesitated. His mind strayed again, and a blush began to rise over the stallion’s face as he counted six roses adorning the crown.

He didn’t understand. Why would anyone like Hannibal show any interest in him? He had done nothing to encourage him. If anything, he only showed why he would be a terrible choice. There were better mares and stallions. Better than a meat-eating outcast.

Will rid himself of the small hope that kept creeping up unannounced and went to discard the crown, but he once again stilled. The hope in his chest rose up again, peeping up as he trailed his fingers gently over the delicate flowers.

The crown found a home in his trinket collection.

The next gift came from the centaur himself.

Will was helping one of the foals get her toy out of a tree when Hannibal approached him. The blond haired centaur waited patiently and once the foal ran off with her friends he held out a package.

“What’s this?” Will asked, wary. Hannibal had been gone for a few days and had only reappeared last night with the package under his arm. Will denied counting the days and wondering if the strange centaur was going to return.

“Something I think you will appreciate.” Hannibal replied, a small smile flittering on his face. Will gave him a skeptical look before carefully peeling back the cloth. His expression melted away to surprise as he took in what was inside.

“These are beautiful.” He murmured, pulling out one of many elegant feathers. It was bright red and nearly as long as one of his fingers. He had never seen anything like it. There were more feathers like it, ranging from vibrant blue to dull yellow.

“I thought you would like them,” Hannibal gestured. “For your lures.”

“Hannibal…” Will looked up at him in wonder, his traitorous, hopeful heart flaring up. “Thank-you.”

Hannibal smiled and patted Will’s shoulder as he walked past. “You should tell me when you are fishing next, Will. I would love to watch you work.”

Will returned to his nest with his gift and added them to his collection. He admired the silky feathers once more before his attention moved to the flower crown. The flowers had faded, the red all but gone as they had dried out in the sun. Not as nice as they were days ago, but Will thought they still looked beautiful.

Hesitantly, Will placed the crown upon his head. The thorns had been painstakingly removed from the inside, leaving his head unarmed. His ears flickered as he adjusted it, the fit a little tight since the crown had dried, but it still worked. He dug out a mirror he had found when he dared to venture out of the herd and examined himself. It was strange seeing his own reflection in such clarity. It was one thing to know one’s self by the river’s reflection, but to have a precise image was still jarring.

Will made a face and almost laughed as his copy mimicked him. He took in how his hair curled around the vines and flowers, how Hannibal got the fit almost perfectly. He experimented to see if the thorns caught his hair as he removed it, but it pulled away with ease.

Returning it to its placement upon his head, Will debated going out of his nest with it on. Wearing it would declare his acceptance of a courtship. He wasn’t sure if he wanted all of the

attention it would bring from the herd. Did he even want to accept Hannibal's courtship? It was all too much for the centaur.

For now, he put the crown back with this collection, his courage running away.

Days turned to weeks turned to two months. Will and Hannibal continued their unofficial courtship, neither making an official acceptance. After the gift of feathers, Will took Hannibal to the river and showed the stallion how to make lures. He struggled a little, but Hannibal was a master at crafting.

"While not my preferred medium," Hannibal admitted as he finished his third lure, securing a spotted white feather to the string. "I find crafting a relaxing leisure."

"What do you like to create?" Will inquired, hoping he didn't sound too interested.

Hannibal gave him a mysterious smile before handing him his lure.

"I like to draw. Places I've been, creatures I've met. Anything I find worthy to be immortalized by my hand."

"I wish I could draw." Will sighed. Yet another flaw for the centaur. "I bet your creations are beautiful."

This earned him another smile, as if Will had told him something humorous. It was unnerving. "I have some parchment from my last trip. Perhaps I could help guide your hand."

"I don't know. I proved to be useless by the others' attempts."

Hannibal chuckled and tweaked Will's curls. "You'll find my patience is unwavering."

The hand traveled through Will's hair and gently tugged at a furred ear, making the brunet freeze. He tried in vain to calm the heat in his face, but it proved futile. He wanted to look away, but the thumb stroking his ear prevented him. Hannibal moved his hand, and Will cursed himself as he leaned into the retreating limb.

"Why don't you come to my nest and we can start the lesson."

Will blinked at him in confusion until his mind finally caught up with him. "O-oh! Yeah sure."

Hannibal smiled. Will smiled back.

Will squinted at the paper and contemplated jabbing one of his lures into it. The picture was… terrible. Hannibal had gone over the basics with him and walked him through some simple drawing exercises. On their first attempt, Will was near tears with frustration and swore off drawing. Hannibal cornered him the next day and had him try again. A week

passed and Will was…improving. He guessed. Hannibal seemed proud of him, so that was something.

But his current project was bad. He was trying to draw his lures. It seemed simple enough and Hannibal suggested he start small. The lure part wasn't too hard, but trying to get the feathers to appear fluffy and the lure shiny he saw himself doomed to never draw. Still, he put aside the drawing, pulled out a new sheet, and tried again.

He was liking his second attempt by the time he heard hoof steps approaching. Thinking it was Hannibal, he looked up with a smile. Upon seeing Freddie, he frowned.

"What do you want?" Will asked flatly, and the ginger mare pouted in mock hurt.

"What? No hello? I suppose you were waiting for someone else, meat-eater."

"If you don't have anything important to say then go away." Will replied, used to her jabs. He continued to focus on his drawing, and Freddie was silent to the point Will thought she went away.

The paper was ripped from his hands and in a fluid movement of orange Freddie was running away.

"Hey!" Will took after her, but the mare proved to be faster. Freddie kept just out of reach, taking sharp turns and causing Will to lose momentum in order to keep his balance as he attempted to follow. The chase was cut short as Freddie jumped across the smaller part of the river. Will was running too slow to make the jump and was forced to stop.

Will watched as Freddie examined the parchment and shook her head.

"Terrible. Dreadful. What are they even supposed to be? Fish? Birds?"

Will didn't answer.

Freddie waved the drawing around and look at it in a different angle. "I don't even know why you try, meat-eater. Didn't you learn from your first lesson. You can't draw. You're not like us."

Freddie waved the paper again, sneering. "Who are you trying to impress? Haven't you learned from when Alana turned you away. Why would anyone want an outcast like you?"

Will wanted to shout at her, give her all the reasons and proof that someone did want him. But he didn't because of the dark voice that always rears its ugly head when he doubts agreed with her.

Instead, Will watched as Freddie released his drawing, sending it flying in the air for a brief moment before it landed on the river and floated away out of sight. Will remained even after Freddie left, his hopeful heart arguing with his logical head. Why would Hannibal want him. The evidence was all there, but what if it was all a cruel joke? Just a sick, twisted joke.

Will left the river and returned to his nest. He picked up the flower crown, put it on the floor, and raised his hoof to smash it. He couldn't go through with the action. Instead, he grabbed a travel bag he had found during his brief wanderings, packed a few items: lures, the mirror, feathers, and, after a fierce debate, the flower crown. He grabbed these things, left his nest, and entered the forest with no intention to say good-bye or ever return.

Chapter 2

Will knew once he left the herd it was only a matter of time before he would begin to feel lonely. It was only natural. Centaurs were social creatures and enjoyed the company of their herd. The stallions that were driven off usually stayed together until they could find another herd to compete for leader status or start their own group. Will did not want another herd. They would only turn on him for his strange ways. He had experienced loneliness in his herd; the isolation and fear from his fellow centaurs. No, that would not do. He would stay on his own, maybe find satyrs or nymphs to be friends with.

It was four days since his departure and expected the loneliness, but what he couldn't stand was the ringing silence. He was used to having the others nearby. Hearing their hoof beats or their voices carrying in the wind. Out on his own there was empty cold wind and his own hoofs to keep him company.

But worst of all, he missed Hannibal. It was silly to miss the other centaur, but he couldn't help it. He knew it was a fairytale to think Hannibal would want him. The others would have ostracized Hannibal just like they did with Will, and the lonely centaur doubted a centaur as beautiful as him would appreciate it. Maybe Hannibal would have tried to convince him to leave, but what if Hannibal grew weary of Will? What if he listened to what the others had to say and left him alone in the unknown. It was a lifetime of possibilities which all lead to uncertainty.

But you fell in love, his thoughts whispered, and Will clutched at the straps of his bag. It wouldn't have worked. What happened between them might have been a courtship, but Will didn't want to isolate the other centaur by having him be associated with him. It was better this way.

The lonely centaur sighed and shook his head, trying to think of more important matters. Such as finding shelter. His ears folded down as the wind picked up and he curled his arms around himself. He walked a bit faster and scanned the trees around him to see if any had weak branches he could take. He began to pick up fallen branches and twigs and found a small crevice of a fallen tree. Will arranged branches to make a small nest. It didn't keep the wind out, but it was better than nothing.

Will was about to settle in and wait out the coming storm when he heard something crashing through the foliage. He stood on alert and gripped his bag. He scanned the trees, but with the darkened clouds hiding the evening sun he couldn't see anything in the shadows. He began to back up and wished he had something to defend himself. A true centaur wouldn't need to make weapons. It was not needed with their powerful legs.

He was ready to sprint when a shadow broke through. Startled, Will reared up and blindly kicked at the shadow. He missed, but he barely made out the low grunt as the shadow moved to avoid being hit. Will lowered his legs back to the ground, his shoulders stiff. He recognized the stranger's voice.

“Hannibal?”

Will didn’t have enough time to react as he was pulled into a tight embrace. He briefly struggled, but Hannibal had a firm grip on him. He laced his fingers through Will’s curls with one hand as the other gripped him around his torso. Will went limp in the embrace and quietly reveled in the warmth from the other centaur. When Hannibal finally pulled back his kept his hands on Will’s shoulders and looked him over, his maroon eyes searching out for any wounds. He looked worried, and Will felt horrible for making him worry. He opened his mouth to apologize, to explain, but Hannibal shook his head.

“We will discuss it later.” Hannibal assured him, giving his shoulders a tight squeeze before trailing down to grasp his hands. “Come, it is going to rain.”

Soon the two centaurs were huddled in the nest. It was still cold, but Will didn’t notice due to the warmth coming from Hannibal’s body. He had no choice but to stay close to him, and he was silently relieved for it. And he doubted Hannibal would have allowed him to try and put distance between them. Will sighed as he rested his head on Hannibal’s shoulder and a smile appeared as he felt an arm curl around him.

They did not discuss Will’s departure from the herd like Will thought they would. Instead Hannibal asked if he had ever seen the ocean.

“I have some acquaintances I wouldn’t mind visiting.” Hannibal explained as he grabbed his own bag Will hadn’t noticed the night before. “It would be nice to introduce you to them.”

Will couldn’t refuse. Hannibal smiled and took him by the hand and together they set off towards the east. Will felt an ecstatic joy as they walked, the dark, negative voice becoming smaller and smaller as they traveled through the forest and waded through the plains of tall golden grass. Days turned to nights and the moon changed form as they built a temporary nest each evening. They fell into their usual routine they had before and Hannibal began again to help Will with his drawing. Will, in turn, taught Hannibal how to catch and gut fish. Hannibal was a quick learner, as he was with everything, and Will was fascinated with how the other centaur’s nimble fingers held the knife and sliced open the fish.

“I can’t believe you’ve never done this before,” Will commented in wonder. Hannibal chuckled and gave him a secretive smile.

“I’ve told you I’ve met others like you, William.”

It sounded like Hannibal was only telling him a partial truth, but Will didn’t call him on it, falling more and more in love as Hannibal cooked the fish over the fire and took a bite without hesitation.

Each night the centaurs sat close together while watching the dying embers of the fire, and Hannibal whispered stories into Will’s ear to lull him to sleep. Will would smile and lean into Hannibal’s side as the other centaur ran fingers through his hair and over his ears. He had never felt so cared for since his father’s passing. He felt safe and secure.

It was on the fifth night Will dug out the flower crown from his bag, slowly stroking over what was left of the dried petals. Most of them had crumbled into his bag, but the wreath of thorns held tight. Hannibal didn't say a word as Will placed the crown on his head, and when Will finally met his eyes did he swoop in to give him a kiss. The crown lost a few more petals that night.

Will stood in awe as he took in the view, barely registering Hannibal's hand as it rested on his back.

"What do you think?" Hannibal asked, and though Will wasn't facing him he could hear the amusement in his voice.

Will didn't answer as he took in his first sight of the ocean. The sky was gray and the blue waters were rushing towards the sandy beach, but there was no threat of a storm. He took a deep breath and tried to memorize the scent. It wasn't anything like the warm, green smell of nature in the forest. It was its own concoction of salt and earth, the moisture hanging heavily around him. He closed his eyes and listened to the water and wind.

"I never want to leave." Will finally answered. Hannibal wrapped his arm around him and pulled him closer.

They made a nest in the forest bordering the ocean. It was close enough to still hear the crashing waves and smell the salt in the air, but far enough to be safe from any storm. Will placed the last finishing touches on the nest before stepping back to take it all in. It was his new home. His and Hannibal's new home. It was hard to fully comprehend; he feared he was dreaming and he would wake up to be just a pleasant yet cruel dream. He found himself pinching himself just to make sure.

Hannibal came up beside him carrying more branches in case they needed to add any for their nest. He thanked Will as the other centaur helped him and as they placed the branches in a pile he talked about his acquaintances that were nearby.

"They will be delighted to meet you, but I think we should wait a few days to settle in before meeting them. They will understand."

Will thought it was a great idea, though he was still nervous about meeting other centaurs. What if they rejected him because he was a meat eater like his old herd? Hannibal soothed his fears with a kiss and stoked his sides.

"Trust me, my dear Will, they are going to love you." Hannibal promised. He separated from Will to grab his bag and pulled something out. "I've been meaning to give you this, but I wanted to wait until we arrived."

Will watched as Hannibal procured a wreath of flowers none like Will had ever seen. They had deep red roses similar to the ones of Will's first flower crown, but red carnations jointed

the roses. Another addition was entangled with the vines in the form of long white thorns. On closer inspection Will realized they were bones carved into sharp points.

“At first I had feared you found my first crown subpar when I first gave it to you. Wreath making is not my specialty. I knew I had to create another that you would find worthy of wearing. I found the bones while I was traveling and thought they would make a perfect addition. I hope I’ve not offended you.” Hannibal added as Will stroked his fingers over the sharp points. Will didn’t respond, his heart aflutter and tears welling in his eyes.

“It’s perfect.” He whispered and smiled up at Hannibal. “I—thank you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiled back and reached up to remove the old crown from Will’s head to replace it with his new crown. The thorns in the vines did not dig into his head or ears and the bones did not tangle into his hair. Hannibal drew in a breath at the sight before pulling Will in for a kiss.

“Beautiful,” he whispered in between kisses, and Will had to agree.

Will closed his eyes and leaned into the kiss, missing as Hannibal reached a hand up and pulled a stray red hair out of the vines and released it in the wind.

End Notes

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